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SOCIAL WORK AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT: TOWARDS A SOCIAL-ECOLOGICAL PRACTICE MODEL

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ABSTRACT

Social work and sustainable development: towards a social-ecological practice model
The current social-ecological crisis will lead to major social changes, for better or for worse. Society needs to ensure that those changes involve a transition to a more sustainable society. Since this transition touches upon all aspects of life, social work cannot remain outside that process. This article argues how social work practice may contribute to sustainable development, provided it includes the ecological environment in its contextual approach. To this end, a general model for

social-ecological practice has been developed, centred on the concepts of empowerment, social capital formation and resilience building. The core concepts of the model are analysed in order to create a coherent interpretation both in multilevel systems terms and in political terms. The social-ecological practice model is thus presented as a political tool for social change.

Keywords

Sustainable development, transformational social work, empowerment, social capital, resilience, multilevel social-ecological systems approach, political-ethical reflection

SAMENVATTING

Sociaal werk en duurzame ontwikkeling: naar een sociaal-ecologisch praktijkmodel
De huidige sociaal-ecologische crisis zal grote sociale veranderingen veroorzaken, ten kwade of ten goede. De samenleving moet deze veranderingen beïnvloeden in de richting van een transitie naar een duurzame samenleving. Omdat dat proces aan alle aspecten van ons leven raakt, kan ook het sociaal werk er niet buiten blijven. Dit artikel argumenteert hoe sociaalwerkpraktijk kan bijdragen aan duurzame ontwikkeling wanneer het de ecologische omgeving opneemt in een contextuele benadering. Daartoe wordt er een algemeen model ontwikkeld voor een sociaal-ecologische praktijk die gecentreerd is rond empowerment, vorming van sociaal kapitaal en opbouw van veerkracht. De kernconcepten van het model worden geanalyseerd met het oog op een coherente interpretatie, zowel in multilevel-systeemtermen als in politieke termen. Zo wordt het sociaal-ecologische praktijkmodel voorgesteld als een politiek middel voor sociale verandering.

TREFWOORDEN

Duurzame ontwikkeling, transformationeel sociaal werk, empowerment, sociaal kapitaal, veerkracht, multilevel sociaal-ecologische systeembenadering, politiek-ethische reflectie

INTRODUCTION

Our planet is suffering from the combined stress of a global ecological, financial and economic crisis. The main victims of this crisis are those who are the least responsible for it: the poor. This makes the relationship between the ecological crisis and the globally widening social gap an important challenge for social work. From a social point of view, sustainable development is not

in the first place about the material implications of the ecological crisis, but it calls the foundations of our society into question. Social work needs to explore the social dimension of sustainable development and ensure that it is incorporated into the public debate. Naturally, social work must continue to value the principles of social justice, and stepping up the effort for a more equal society is an integral part of the process of sustainable development. But there is more. The current social-ecological crisis necessitates a *transition* towards a sustainable society, and that means a different society. It involves a shift in society's fundamental principles or a "paradigm shift" (Peeters, 2010b, 2011b, 2012b). The awareness of ecological limits means that the redistribution of wealth is a more radical undertaking than we ever assumed before. Moreover, it will require us to rethink our ideas on well-being and emancipation, because these are so strongly associated with the ability to participate in ever-growing material prosperity. For a new idea of well-being, we will need to safeguard the quality of our relationships at all levels, beyond the satisfaction of basic needs. Sustainability is, thus, about the quality of our society.

Taking its internationally accepted mission as a starting point (as formulated in its international definition), social work is well able to contribute to the moral agenda of sustainable development, as I have already written about before in great detail (Peeters, 2010b, 2012b, 2012c). However, for this to happen, social work needs more than ever to include the environment in its contextual approach to practice. Furthermore, I have argued for an understanding of social work that coincides fully with the necessary social change, and thus becomes more "transformational social work" (Payne, 2006). This view is consistent with the implicitly political nature of the international definition of social work. This implies that social change is a fundamental aspect of professional social work and that it therefore has the character of a social movement, or at least is closely related to social movements. Taking this vision as its starting point, this article develops a general model or *framework* for social-ecological practice centred on *empowerment*, *social capital formation* and *resilience building*[1]. It tries to bring together some known elements in a coherent way and with a dual approach to society: *systemic* and *political*. The model presented gives rise to a political vision of sustainable development, and it is therefore to this concept that we will turn first.

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN THE PICTURE

Sustainable development can be defined from a range of interest-oriented points of view. It is essentially a political concept, a contested area of social discourse on the direction of society (Baker, 2006; Peeters, 2012b, 2012c). This does not change by using the term "transition".

As such, the communicative power of a representation is an important means by which to establish a social agenda. To present a general model with which to frame the contribution of social work practice to sustainable development, we first need to establish an appropriate representation of sustainable development.

Sustainable development is most commonly understood as an interaction between three dimensions – the social, the ecological, and the economic – as embodied in the widely used notion of the "triple bottom line" (Elkington, 1998) or "triple P": people, planet, and prosperity or profit. Since the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg in 2002, the United Nations has favoured the notion of "prosperity" rather than "profit", in order to indicate what is the finality of the economy from the point of view of society (European Commission, 2002). Today, the dimensions of sustainable development are often viewed in terms of capital, including social, ecological and economic capital, but also human and financial capital (Parkin, 2010). Many representations are based on a triangular relationship between these three dimensions and suggest that sustainable development is a reconciliation or balance between them all. However, representations of this kind are problematic because they put the three dimensions on an equal footing with one another, and do not include any notion of ecological limits.

I have argued elsewhere that the required transition to sustainability must be based on an ecological worldview with an intrinsically relational character, and that systemic representations are the most suitable (Peeters, 2010b, 2012b). According to a more realistic image of the relationship between the dimensions of sustainable development, society is embedded in the ecosystem, and the economy in turn is part of society (see Figure 1) (Parkin, 2010). Such a representation with nested systems also reflects the basic tenets of ecological economics (Daly, 1999, 2008). Moreover, the relational character of the ecological worldview is further revealed by the asymmetrical position of the embedded spheres. If reality is essentially relational, then there is no centred subject, nor any other centred object or system. This view encourages society to adopt a more humble attitude towards the Earth's ecosystem and puts economy in a serving role.

This representation offers a number of clear advantages: it situates sustainable development in a more realistic framework, allowing the ecosystem to limit society and the economy. It also shows that the socio-cultural meaning of ecology is larger than its valorization in economic terms. Finally, it corresponds well with the contextual representations used in social work's ecological systems thinking, even though the biophysical environment was mainly not taken into

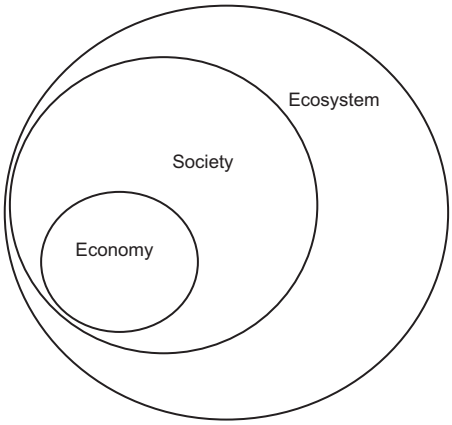

Figure 1: Three dimensions of sustainable development.

consideration (Coates, 2003; Peeters, 2012b). However, Figure 1 clearly shows why ecological issues are also social issues and *vice versa*. In addition, this representation offers the opportunity to look at systemic interactions from the perspective of society. Economic production – as well as how humans behave towards the natural environment – is a socially mediated process, hence the location of the social sphere between the economic and ecological spheres. The mediating position of the social sphere indicates the importance of social – and political – action in the transition towards sustainability. So, the contribution of the economy to sustainable development may be seen as a cooperative action between responsible business and other social actors (see Figure 2).

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AND SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

Roome's (2008) model of sustainable development is not only useful for framing the economy but also other social practices – such as science, technological research, health care and so on – as basically *social-ecological*[2]. In the same way, we can look at social work as a domain of practices which has a systemic place in society. Moreover, this perspective accords with a tradition of ecosystems thinking in social work (Coates, 2003; Peeters, 2012b). Framing the problems that social workers deal with as social-ecological issues may cause us to adjust the current objectives and working methods of social work. As an initial approach, we propose that social work can

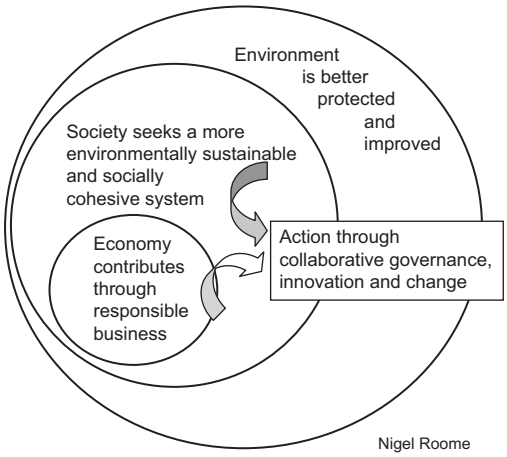

Figure 2: Sustainable development (Roome, 2008).

contribute to sustainable development by building social capital by focusing on empowerment in cooperation with other social actors (see Figure 3).

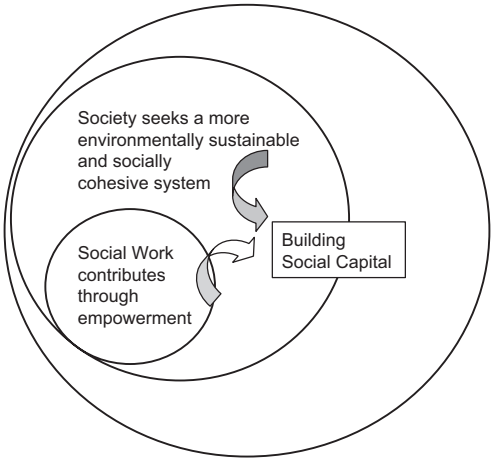

Figure 3: Sustainable development and social work.

This model also has heuristic possibilities for formulating more specific objectives for social work in relation to sustainable development. Figure 4 illustrates this with regard to the contribution of social

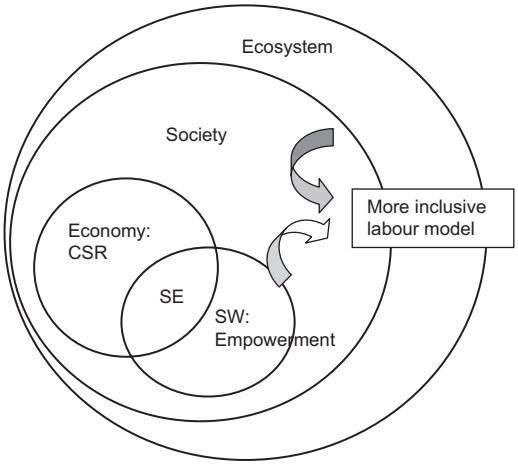

Figure 4: Sustainable development and the social economy.

economy (SE) to a more inclusive model of labour. What are the opportunities for cooperation between corporate social responsibility (CSR) and the empowerment approach of social work (SW)?

A further elaboration of the model also provides a heuristic for multi-level cooperative action built around the key interacting signifiers of empowerment, resilience, and social capital. The relationships between them are presented in Figure 5, in which empowerment stands both for the overall process of practice and for the result of this process: actual social change (DuBois & Miley, 2005). We can interpret the process as follows: empowerment starts from the capacities and strengths of people – individuals and groups – in order to enhance their social capital. Social capital is a basis for resilience. And resilience is a condition for empowerment, and thus for actual social change in a bottom-up process. One should not see this as a simple linear process, but as a complex process in which the various elements can be connected by many positive feedback loops.

We thus have a representation of a process of social change from a functional point of view, which means: how we can make change happen. But social processes are never ethically or politically neutral and so, they must be accompanied and even led by political-ethical reflection and discussion about the desirable direction of action. This emphasizes the importance of the accord between the ethical agenda of sustainable development and the mission of social work (Peeters, 2010b, 2012c).

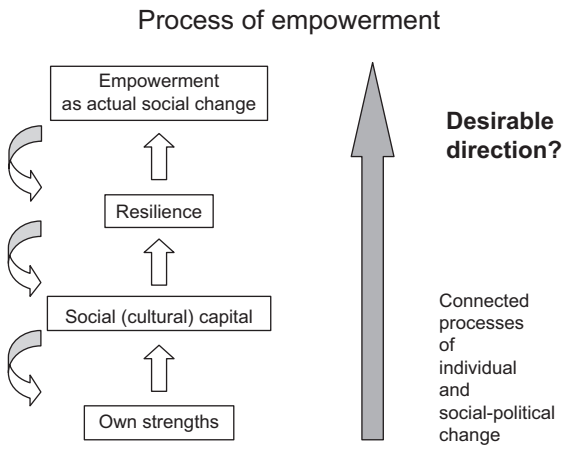

Figure 5: Process of empowerment.

THE CORE BUILDING BLOCKS OF THE SOCIAL-ECOLOGICAL PRACTICE MODEL

Viewed from an ecosystems perspective, both social work and sustainable development can be seen as taking place on a number of levels, from the micro-individual to the macro-community level. The same applies to empowerment, social capital and resilience. Moreover, just like sustainable development or transition, these concepts can be considered political. And although they may look familiar to social workers, an appropriate and coherent interpretation with a view to social change towards a sustainable society requires a more in-depth discussion. In the current neo-liberal context, we can see that they have narrowed down to individual terms. So, from a relational worldview, we want to shift attention from an individual interpretation to a social-ecological.

Empowerment

Empowerment builds on a fundamental shift in social work practice away from the deficit-focused medical pathology model towards a more positive view of the service-users' capabilities to engage in social action. Service users are seen as "partners" or participants in a process of learning, development, and social change (Pease, 2002; Dubois & Miley, 2005; Driessens & Van Regenmortel, 2006). From this position, empowerment is paradigmatic for a participatory approach to all social work, and thus stands in the core of our framework for practice. Empowerment implies

a positive or proactive multi-level approach whereby people gain power, and is thus both the *process* of developing the capability for social action and the *goal* of social change (Peeters, 2008).

> Empowerment suggests both individual determination over one's own life and democratic participation in the life of one's community, often through mediating structures such as schools, neighbourhoods, churches, and other voluntary organizations. Empowerment conveys both a psychological sense of personal control or influence and a concern with actual social influence, political power, and legal rights. It is a multilevel construct applicable to individual citizens as well as to organizations and neighbourhoods; it suggests the study of people in context. (Rappaport, 1987, p. 121)

The presence of *power* in empowerment stresses its *political* character, which requires a clear understanding. According to Hannah Arendt, power indicates a relationship between people and is distinct from the notion of *strength*, which is a characteristic of an individual entity.

> Power corresponds to the human ability not just to act, but to act in concert. Power is never the property of an individual; it belongs to a group and remains in existence only so long as the group keeps together. (Arendt, 1972, p. 143)

Power is often seen as negative because it implies domination or *power over*. But for Arendt, power is a matter of capacity through cooperation and partnership – or *power with* (Mary, 2008). This latter view of power is the one that is relevant for empowerment (Nixon, 2001): a process of positive interaction, in which the common capacity for action increases through recognizing and pooling the particular capabilities of individuals or groups. We need both notions of power. So, where there are situations of domination, empowerment becomes a process of building *counter-power* for social change. In that respect a "strengths approach" has to pay attention to people's capabilities to resist domination (Pease, 2002; Guo & Tsui, 2010).

The relational and collaborative character of empowerment is also underlined by authors who believe that the methodological underpinning of empowerment can be found in social group work (e.g. Vansevenant, Driessens & Van Regenmortel, 2008). Maton (2008, p. 20) defines empowerment as "a group-based, participatory, developmental process through which marginalized or oppressed individuals and groups gain greater control over their lives and environment, acquire valued resources and basic rights, and achieve important life goals and reduced social marginalization".

However, empowerment must be divorced from the individualizing trend within neoliberal free market ideology which is depoliticizing social work. Empowerment requires social workers to take a stand against injustice and individualizing activation policies and programmes which disregard the structural causes of unemployment problems and ascribe everything to individual responsibility. A transformative, emancipatory interpretation of empowerment is based on the idea of "common but differentiated responsibilities" (Peeters, 2010b, 2012b, 2012c) and collaboration. This is also important for an emancipatory view of sustainable development, since many policy approaches focus on behavioural influence rather than on the power to act. They approach people as consumers, rather than citizens. On the other hand, from the empowerment perspective, *"co-creation"* seems to be a good term to express the positive approach to people working together for a just and sustainable future[3].

Social capital

There is a functional and moral argument for the importance of social capital formation in sustainable development. The global social-ecological crisis will inevitably lead to major and rapid social changes. Such a radical social transition will demand considerable adaptability or resilience from individuals and social systems alike. And resilience depends on social capital (see below). Moreover, citizens have the right to participate in the changes that will lead them towards a new, more sustainable way of life. Social capital is related to social solidarity and social inclusion, in contradistinction to the competition and social exclusion that characterize the economic growth model. So improving social capital is simultaneously a condition and a part of the sustainability transition.

Social capital resides in diverse groups, organizations, and communities, social networks, and formal and informal social support systems. As an economic metaphor, however, one runs the risk of seeing this social capital merely as an investment in social purposes and goals (Peeters, 2010b), but a purely functional implementation is not adequate for an emancipatory perspective. Social work must emphasize the intrinsic quality of trusting relationships, strong communities, and resilient networks as crucial to well-being. They are also the basis for humans' capacity to discover meaning in their lives, and thus to be ready to take steps in a process of social change. In this way we will see that meaning and sense-making are important factors in people's resilience (see Figure 7).

Like empowerment, social capital formation refers to a cooperative process of building and maintaining social connections, networks, and supports as a buffer against adversity. It can be defined as follows:

> Social capital is the process of building trusting relationships, mutual understanding and shared actions that bring together individuals, communities and institutions. This process enables cooperative action that generates opportunity and/or resources realized through networks, shared norms and social agency. (Loeffler *et al*., 2004, p. 24)

This definition incorporates various levels of action, which we also find in Mathbor's three steps model for building social capital based on the World Bank's classification of it (see Figure 6).

Although there are discussions about the exact delimitation of the different levels of social capital, and they include a complex of actions, for our purposes here it is sufficient to recognize the importance of relationships and networking at various levels. The basis is a process of *bonding*: building trusting relationships between individuals, in the first place families and close friendships, but also other primary groups or communities. At a second level, a process of *bridging* makes connections and networks between those groups. At a third level neighbourhoods, social groups, organizations, movements and networks establish relationships with local authorities, governments, public institutions and large organizations: *linking*.

From the perspective of empowerment, this is a cooperative process of building power for social change. So if social-ecological social work wants to realize its structural agenda, this scheme indicates both the importance and the possibilities of networking with social movements. Since the linking process may yield a relationship of cooperation as well as one of resistance,

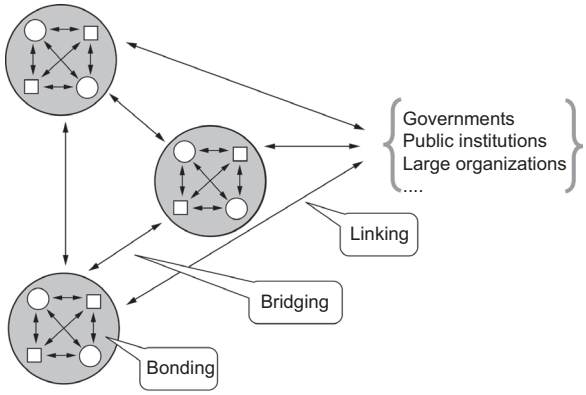

Figure 6: Steps in building social capital (according to Mathbor, 2007, p. 360).

we need broad coalitions to push authorities in the right direction. It would indeed be not justified that linking would create new relationships of domination, for example, which we see as a consequence of neo-liberal activation policies. Without the development of power within the *civil society*, social work will be doomed to operate within the *status quo*. This process starts from the point where social workers as professionals do not allow themselves to be individualized, and take responsibility for society with their organizations. And when they see service users or community members as partners, they can set off on the – not easy and possibly long – road to the formation of social movements, or to cooperate with them (Peeters, 2010b, 2012a, 2012b).

Resilience

To understand the fundamental significance of resilience for a sustainability transition, we need to begin with our knowledge how *social-ecological systems* function (Walker, Holling, Carpenter & Kinzing, 2004; Walker & Salt, 2006). We therefore assume that each social connection is embedded in a broader social-ecological context. And to connect social capital with resilience, the scheme in Figure 6 is interpreted in terms of social-ecological systems.

Social-ecological systems are dynamic entities, characterized by adaptive cycles of growth, conservation, release and reorganization. Different systems are in different phases in that process, and interact across multiple scales, which is called "panarchy". Under this approach, resilience is an important systems characteristic which strongly influences the sustainability of a social-ecological system. It is "the capacity of a system to absorb disturbance and reorganize while undergoing change so as to still retain essentially the same function, structure, identity, and feedbacks" (Walker *et al*., 2004).

This definition implies that the requirements for resilience vary according to the potential impact of the external challenges to a system. For example, a social organization that unexpectedly has to deal with extra work can solve that by temporarily working more overtime, and returning to normal afterwards. On the other hand, with a major increase in certain problems – such as that of unemployment in times of economic crisis – the same organization may require a more thorough restructuring. At the wider systems level, we have to consider how our social security system should be reformed, in order to retain its social security and welfare function, when for reasons of sustainability the policy of economic growth is no longer an option (Peeters, 2010b, 2012b, 2012c).

Therefore, resilience is related to two other system characteristics: (i) *adaptability*, "the capacity of actors in a system to influence resilience", and (ii) *transformability*, "the capacity to create a fundamentally new system when ecological, economic, or social (including political) conditions make the existing system untenable" (Walker *et al*., 2004). So, on the one hand resilience will be an important element in overcoming the disturbance caused by social-ecological systems in situations of crisis, such as when ecological disasters occur due to climate change. On the other hand, it implies a capacity for change, thus the development of resilience may contribute to a sustainability transition process and in this case does not involve merely adapting to the social *status quo*.

Empirical studies show that the sustainability of a social-ecological system depends on striking an adequate balance between the efficiency of its processes and exchanges with other systems, and its resilience (Lietaer, Ulanowicz & Goerner, 2009). The link with social capital is that resilience is based on a variety of subsystems, possibilities and processes, and on the number and nature of the connections between them. Sufficient diversity and connections provide a kind of surplus of opportunities for exchange and feedback. This *redundancy* functions as a back-up in problem situations, provides exit routes and alternative solutions. Accordingly, the sustainability of social-ecological systems depends on, amongst other things, the presence of sufficient social capital. In addition, the importance of redundancy draws the attention to the personal capacities, knowledge and skills of the individuals in a system. As such, a resilience-oriented approach to education and training will promote the broadest possible development of human capabilities, rather than competences that are too often only connected with predetermined objectives.

Having said this, if a system performs below optimum efficiency, this will also lead to productivity problems. At the same time, however, unilaterally striving for efficiency by streamlining subsystems and processes, and rationalizing "redundant" connections and possibilities will undermine the resilience of systems. They would become stiff and brittle, which undermines their effectiveness in the longer term. In addition to the diversity of connections, *modularity* and *tightness of feedback*, both in time and in space, are also important in creating resilience (Walker & Salt, 2006). It is a matter of intervening in time, and thus avoiding the unnecessary proliferation of problems. This again links back to social capital and community building, beginning on a local and regional scale, with subsidiarity between the different levels.

There is another resilience theory which is rooted in psychology. However, when in this case resilience is interpreted in terms of a relational view of individuals, it can be integrated into a

systems approach at all levels of society. From our perspective this means a reframing within one social-ecological systems approach. That is all the more important because this concept of resilience has recently been bolstered by the "strengths perspective" in social work (Saleebey, 2009), and is seen as an essential precondition for empowerment (Van Regenmortel, 2002). It has been defined as "the capability of a person or a system (group, community) to lead a good life and to achieve […] positive development despite difficult living conditions" (Vanistendael, 1997, cited by Driessens & Van Regenmortel, 2006, p. 115).

Van Regenmortel argues that resilience is a *social construct* and, as such, is not a fixed personality trait but the result of a dynamic, non-deterministic, context-related (multi-layered) process of development. On the personal level, resilience is a *social-psychological* concept, then, which allows us to conceive of it – as at the other levels – as a systems concept and to link it with social capital. Moreover, many factors contribute to personal resilience, but it is based on bonding and engagement with significant others and the informal social networks, as presented in the *casita* model or "house of resilience" (Figure 7). As with our remarks on empowerment, an individualistic interpretation of resilience must also be avoided. Appealing to personal resilience is no substitute for social policy (Van Regenmortel & Peeters, 2010).

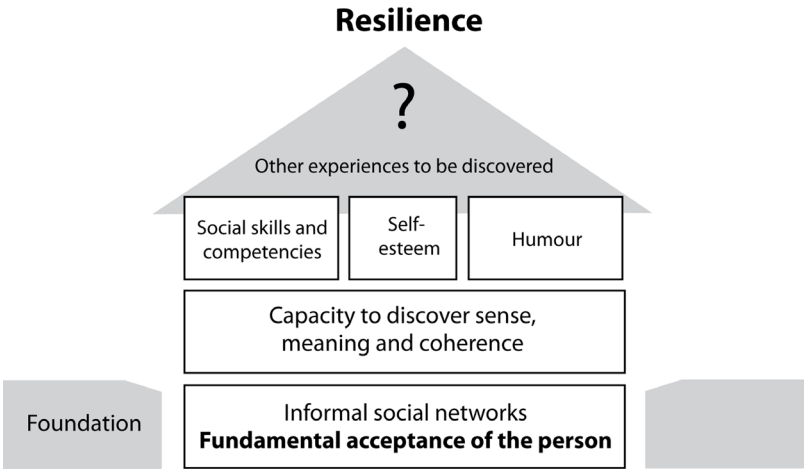

Figure 7: The house of resilience (according to Vanistendael & Lecomte, 2000).

A SOCIAL-ECOLOGICAL PRACTICE MODEL OF SOCIAL WORK AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

After this brief exposition of the core elements of the empowerment scheme (Figure 5), we will now propose a general practice model for social-ecological work, using the conceptual framework of the "eco-social approach" of Matthies, Närhi and Ward (2001). This was developed as a framework for community work in European cities, and aimed to build a more sustainable living environment on the basis of three ideas which encompass one another and can be represented by concentric circles:

1. The *eco-social approach* is an *umbrella* concept that encompasses a broad contextual perspective that corresponds to the classic person-in-environment configuration in social work but also extends its mainly social focus to the biophysical environment.
2. At its core is the social action that is inherent to *empowerment*, a citizen-oriented practice with service users as partners in a process of learning, development, and social change. This service-user perspective shifts the focus from social exclusion to social capital (Boeck, McCullough & Ward, 2001).
3. *Social impact assessment* (SIA) as a participatory research methodology for social workers and service users – or community members is the bridge between the social-ecological environment and social action (Närhi, 2001, 2004).

According to Närhi and Matthies (2001), the eco-social approach provides:

> a holistic and reflective perspective to social work methods. Eco-social work is a theoretical-methodological approach, and as such is not a new method. Rather its aim is to unite all methodological levels of social work. At the same time, the eco-social approach to social work is a point of view that can be applied to any level of social work methods. (p. 36)

This corresponds with the core of our action model for social-ecological work. So although Matthies' eco-social approach was developed within community work practice, it can be applied to other types of social work intervention. Interventions which aim to bring about structural or political change traditionally belong to the social work profile and remain crucial due to the key role of greater social justice at the heart of sustainable development (Peeters, 2010b, 2012c). Advocacy and politically oriented actions are needed – more than ever – in this process of major social change. In addition to SIA, other types of participatory research will play an important role. A good example

is the project "Energy and Poverty" undertaken by Samenlevingsopbouw, the Flemish organization for community development. In this project, underprivileged people are continuously involved as "experts through experience" to support policy-oriented proposals and actions (Peeters, 2012b).

Another important aspect of a sustainability transition is *social learning,* which can help people leave the road to "unsustainability" and take the lesser-known path to sustainability in many fields: production and consumption, way of living and lifestyle, mobility, leisure activities, travel or attitude towards open spaces and nature, and so on. These learning processes are mainly informal, yet they require renewed attention from social workers, because they are attempts to align social action with the social-ecological context. As such, the goal of social learning could be given a more explicit role from the start in organizing some social activities (Wals, 2007). In addition, it is crucial for social change not to disconnect community work and social learning from political work and to avoid reinforcing the trend towards depoliticization that characterizes neo-liberal society (Van Poeck, Vandenabeele & Wildemeersch, 2010).

By adding the concentric concepts of Matthies' "eco-social approach" to the representation of sustainable development that we saw in Figure 3, and broadening it to include more types of intervention, Figure 8 presents an integrative model of generic social work practice as a contribution to sustainable development. It is an *action paradigm* centred on empowerment and

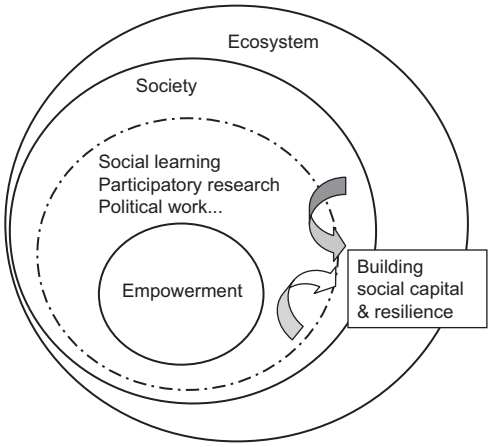

Figure 8: A social-ecological approach to social action.

building up social capital (and resilience), while the dotted circle around the core of empowerment indicates that social work permeates society through a variety of practices. Cooperation with other actors in society is represented by the coming together of the two arrows. Applying the terminology of the current ecological systems theory, we call this a *social-ecological approach*.

Since this model has been conceptualized as a way of building positive power for change towards a just and sustainable society, the need to connect all the elements of the model cannot be overemphasized. However, this connection is not a theoretical matter but a matter for practice because this complex model is not a unified theory and contains heterogeneous elements. As mentioned before, a systems approach can teach us a great deal about the functioning of social-ecological processes, which is a basic condition for a good society, yet it does not define what is *good* in an ethical sense. Political-ethical insights and reflections therefore have a special status, in order to avoid an approach that tends to completely interpret society in naturalistic terms. Correspondingly, there is an irresolvable tension between an *ecological* approach and an *ethical* approach, especially since social work supports the struggle for universally guaranteed rights and services (McNutt & Hoff, 1994). For example, the need for decentralization to create resilient systems (modularity), or the importance of local communities in developing a new relationship with the natural environment, in practice require a reconciliation with the notions of universal rights and equal citizenship on a global scale.

Furthermore, specific methods and practices depend on a careful analysis of the specific social-ecological context in question and the place of social work within it. That goes for the quality of the natural and built environment, access to and distribution of resources, systems of production and consumption; but it also applies to important social conditions for social change, such as the political system, the situation of civil society and social movements, their relationship with social work, the extent to which there is (still) a welfare state, and so on. So within the same social-ecological approach, concrete practices may be very different. Elsewhere, we brought together some examples of practice in Flanders, Belgium (Peeters, 2010a). We also made a more comprehensive list of social-ecological interventions on the basis of three categories: mitigating the negative effects of the current crisis, preparing people *for* change, and participating *in* change (Peeters, 2011b, 2012b).

CONCLUSION

Today's social-ecological crisis indicates that our global social system has arrived at an impasse. Society is facing major changes that will affect many aspects of our lives. Sustainable development

means that society has to take control of this major transition in a positive way. Social work cannot stand idly by, and engaging in that process of change provides an opportunity. To this end, a *social-ecological approach* is presented as a framework for action. At its core sits empowerment as a process of building cooperative power for change, with strengths, social capital and resilience as mutually reinforcing building blocks.

Complex problems call for complex action, and taking a coherent social-ecological approach needs to fulfil several conditions:

- *An ecological or "relational" worldview*: people must be seen as part of a network of relationships with other people, and this network itself is embedded in an ecosystem.
- *A multilevel systems approach*: social action takes place at all levels of these networks, and conceptualizing them as social-ecological systems is helpful for a realistic approach of action and social change. This implies that social action should address all levels and the connections between them at the same time, and that social work has to build alliances with other social actors.
- *Co-creation* is seen as a general denominator for a bottom-up collaborative process of social change.
- *Community building and networking* – in many variations – have a pivotal role in building resilience and power for change. Social work practice, which works mainly with individuals or families, has to explore how to join these processes.
- *Political-ethical reflection* is an ongoing exercise through which to guide the process of social change in the desired direction of "just sustainability".

The current crisis offers an opportunity for change towards a just and sustainable society, provided that we face both the complexity and the opportunities provided by social action. To that end, the social-ecological approach presented in this paper may provide a useful framework.

NOTES

1 This article relates about our contribution at the 2nd ENSACT Conference (Peeters, 2011a) and elaborates on Peeters, 2010b, 2011b who presents this discussion in Dutch.
2 In literature, the term "eco-social" is also used. We prefer "social-ecological" because this is consistent with the term "social-ecological systems" in current systems theory (Walker *et al.*, 2004).
3 I thank Prof. Dr. Gabi Čačinovič Vodringčič (University of Ljubljana) for this suggestion.

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